



## State of the Art

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The Indian legend has it that goddesses Lakshmi and Saraswathi respectively bestow wealth and learning on earth. It was the belief that both the goddesses would never bless the same soul. Such was their mythical rivalry that each would deny her munificence to the one under the other's patronage. In the popular perception, the phenomenon of the rich merchant and the poor pundit was supposedly the manifestation of the goddesses at odds. Thus the merchant accumulated wealth nevertheless contributing to the commerce while the pundit enriched society through his knowledge, himself remaining impoverished. Nevertheless, both seemed reconciled to the enmity of their respective patrons in heaven as they got their share of recognition on earth.

This divine separation of commerce and arts that was the norm till the recent past was the source of the enrichment of the latter on the Indian soil. As there was no money to make in the pursuit of arts, it was the passionate that embraced art with passion to embellish it with devotion. Thus avoided by motivated suitors, art got wedded to talent as the Muses blessed the match and in that happy union, the former was courted by the latter

to be tended with affection as a means of self-expression. However, in the process the artist got his due, feeling self-enriched by the appreciation of the knowledgeable.

Leave alone the classical arts, this art talent union manifested itself in the modern medium of the Indian cinema upon its advent as only those with passion for acting made it to the sets, braving the stigma attached to the performing arts in the prevailing cultural orthodoxy. So was the case the Indian writing in English, in its nascency for a young R. K. Narayan passionately took to writing even at the risk of being a parasite on his family. Well, the list of those artists who pursued or are pursuing art for the sake of art could be exhaustive but this piece is not about the artists but it is about the state of the art, indeed the society, in India today.

When Gandhi gave the call for freedom, those that joined the fray came prepared to forgo everything. Politics was not a paying proposition then and sacrifice was the creed of the freedom fighter. And what talent the mission attracted is reflected in the galaxy of statesmen we have had then. Nowhere in world history were so many exemplary men in a generation or two produced as in India in those years, for that could only happen when passion weds purpose. But what if expediency replaces passion in the political marriage is a public knowledge now. Though not so apparent, this is the case with the state of art as well in India today. The harbinger of wealth and the progenitor of knowledge seemed to have made up in Heaven, and ironically that occasioned the dichotomy in the arena of arts on earth.

Let us examine the literary scene to start with. When the masters rendered those classics of yore, literacy of the times was limited to the social core. Invariably that confined literature to the connoisseurs and kept it away from the crassness of the masses. However, it is the increase in the social literacy that paradoxically caused the degradation of literature! With the multitudes of the educated abounding, publishing appeared a fetching proposition to the enterprising. After all, business acumen is all about catering to what the market demands, and understandably the masses demand but ordinary stuff for easy comprehension! The induced demand for 'time pass' reading required customized writing. And that insensibly pushed the frontiers of literature to the doorsteps of wordsmiths. In due course though, authoring new content gave way to replicating the in vogue writing for risk-free publishing. That made Narayan lament that what was going in the name of writing was but mere documentation.

In order to penetrate the book market, the publishers came up with the stratagem of promotional campaigns by binging authors into the media fore. This insensibly glamorized authors, attracting the aliens into arena of writing. Of course, publishing the book is one thing and promoting it the author is another. How many deserving works go into oblivion without publicity, covered though they are by the book jackets of premier publishers! Not to miss out on the new openings in the book trade, some of the opportunists in the west came up with courses in creative writing for aspiring authors! So, art was put on the assembly line and successfully at that! The net result of all this literary farce is not hard to imagine what with everyone throwing his tailored manuscript into the publishing ring. However, to cope up with the author-rush that they helped create, the publishers would need an army of editors, which of course, the economies of publishing wouldn't permit. The corollary is the need to regulate the incomings through external means.

Thus, the newfound job work opportunity in the book manufacturing created the species of literary agents. So, as the literary agents took it upon themselves to sort out the publishers' mail, the face of book publishing acquired a new dimension. The editorial judgment of yore gave way to the phenomenon of influence peddling as the editors conceded their ground to literary agents. While the system bred laziness in the editorial department, it empowered the agent who could well boast that getting his nod is a good as

being published for after all, the agents are aware of their ability to make the editors lean towards the manuscripts they canvass for. One could imagine the scope of the trade with hundreds of thousands of manuscripts making the rounds, and it is but natural that a spurious agent would surface sooner than later to fleece the gullible writers. In spite of the individual causalities, the agent system seems to work well in the western mass publishing industry.

Let us see how things stand in the arena in Indian writing. It is possible that some of the best writing comes from the less literate areas like Orissa if we were to go by the citations of the National Sahitya Academy. No wonder since in less aware areas the absence of publicity keeps the imposters away from literary pursuits leaving the arena for the genuine for self expression. However, when it comes to the Indian Writing in English, it appears that the media's penchant to glamorize the writers doesn't seem to help the cause of literature for the well-intended book promotion tends to degenerate into promoting the author instead of the book so much so that it gets pushed to the backburner. So, the media focus too centers on the persona of the author without touching upon the nuances of his writings. It's as if the book is but a launching pad to catapult the writer into the obit of fame.

Well, persona centric publicity could be the *raison d'être* of show business but it's the worth of the writing that is at the core of an author's existentialism, isn't it? No one seems to complain though about the state of things. Thanks to the coverage in the magazines many may recognize the Indian Writers in English even in a crowd but how many would answer the call to confirm they read their books. This author as a glamour boy, or gal, phenomenon promoted by the media has made many to fancy their chances by charging into their laptops. It is the sort of documentation, to borrow from Narayan that emanates from their leisure time, which inundates the Indian publishing arena for the most part. As a logical follow-up for stardom, the rightly-connected would throw their weight around to try to jacket their labour in the book form.

The market dynamics being what they are, the publishers have for long reconciled to breakeven through safety measures. Since nothing would sell any way beyond a nominal number, why not settle for the time-tested stuff is what seems to be the Indian English publishing credo. Also, the market dynamics of 'nothing much to win' and 'not so much to lose' tend the publishers to settle for known faces instead of scouting for the unknown talent. Ironically, the limited Indian market size seems to help the literary pirates to hijack the publishing agenda to have their way into the media. What if the Indian English market is one hundred thousand for a given book to win public favour? Maybe, that is when the publishers would look beyond their friends in the hope of roping in the best seller!

It is thus, the limitations of the publishing arena seem to serve the ambitions of the aspirants. For now, the only marketing strategy of the Indian publishers seems to induce the celebrities of sorts to cook up something for a book and then resort to hype to induce the gullible public into buying the same to adorn the bookshelves. All this might help individuals to get published and become authors but that hardly helps the cause of literature, and given these constraints, the lady editors and the marketing men at the publishing houses must be finding it hard to find some publishing space for the genuine authors who come up with something original that might otherwise deserve their consideration. Arguably this women only editorial team could take away some of the objectivity in book selection, but publishers seem not to care. Wonder whether the editorial positions at the publishing houses are not lucrative enough for men to seek them or perhaps the bosses might prefer not to suffer male egos in their presence.

If the Indian literature suffers in want, then plenty afflicts the Indian cinema. The mass adoration as opposed to the ostracism of yore accords the cine-stars a preeminent position in society for the influential to make their way to the silver screen. This naturally leaves the

potential thespians languishing in the shadows while the hams rule the roost in the film world. Here again in societies like Kerala, where the craze for films is less frenzied in comparison, the genuine actor has some chance to get a break. It's no wonder that the national film honours, for the most part, go to the Kerala and the Kannada films while the cine-mad Tamils and Telugus find themselves nowhere in the picture. As it appears, it's the fate of art to be hampered when fortune chases its practitioners. It is here the Indian painting stands apart. Paintings of M F Hussain and Tyeb Mehta might rake in millions in Christie's auctions but the average painter would consider himself lucky if the sale would fetch him the cost of the canvas on which it is painted. Maybe that is the reason why the Indian painting hasn't come into the domain of the fame-seekers but still radiates in the shades of genuine talent limited though it might be.